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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: MINORITY RELIGIONS IN THE URALS - WALK SOFTLY AND YOU WILL
NOT BE HARASSED

REF: MOSCOW 1597

¶1. Sensitive But Unclassified. Not for internet distribution.

¶2. (U) Summary: In recent weeks, consulate officers have met with representatives of three "minority" religions operating in the Urals: Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Evangelical Lutherans. Jehovah's Witnesses appear to experience the most difficulties in carrying out their activities, some of which do not comply with Russian regulations. End Summary.

Adaptable Mormons Report No Major Difficulties

¶3. (SBU) On June 23, we met with the outgoing president of the Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (LDS) in the Urals, Steven Allen. His district matches our consular district almost exactly. For two years he has traveled throughout the district and has been pleasantly surprised by the friendliness and open-mindedness of the local population. There are currently 50 missionaries in the Urals, not all U.S. citizens. They are here on three-month religious visas which must be regularly renewed. LDS has parishes in Perm and in Ufa. They are renovating a building in Yekaterinburg to be their Urals headquarters.

¶4. (SBU) LDS finds regulations governing real estate deals problematic. LDS used to have a nice facility in Tyumen but the lease was not renewed and the space was taken over by Lukoil. Six years ago LDS obtained permission to lease space in Samara, completed a renovation, but was never allowed to hold meetings there. More recently, they experienced difficulty securing space to hold a planning meeting for a group of 600. Ten years ago LDS held a similar meeting here in the Urals Cultural Center (a city owned facility). This year LDS signed a contract with the same facility and paid in advance, but was told two weeks before the meeting that a government facility could not host a religious event.

¶5. (SBU) LDS promotes its faith through worship services, thematic religious and cultural events, and dissemination of printed materials, which are all published abroad, either in Germany or the U.S. English language training is one of the Church's major activities. The classes are limited to conversation, however, since use of formal teaching methods by people not licensed to be teachers is illegal. Other than difficulties locating and keeping premises, Allen said LDS has not experienced any harassment by locals or government. Allen told us that LDS is very careful to keep its activities within Russian law and regulation, and maintains good relations with local authorities.

Jehovah's Witnesses - We'll Do It Our Way

¶6. (SBU) On July 9, Sergey Tanzura, Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) public relations, and Yegiazar Chernikov, JW lawyer, briefed consulate personnel about JW activities in the region and

obstacles faced by the group. JW started activities in Yekaterinburg in 1994. There are currently forty-two congregations in Sverdlovsk oblast. Nine of them, with a total of about 1,000 members, are located in Yekaterinburg. They hold weekly gatherings to study the Bible and religious principles outlined in the magazine "Storozhevaya Bashnya" (The Watchtower), published by JW international. The magazine has been deemed "extremist" by local law enforcement officials in the town of Asbest, a charge that JW has appealed. JW also promotes its ideas by addressing people in the street or going from door to door with copies of Storozhevaya Bashnya. [Note: Although we have not been able to find any limitations on door-to-door methods of promoting a religion, distribution of "extremist" literature is illegal. End note.]

¶7. (SBU) Tanzura recounted the problems JW has experienced in Russia since 2002 when the federal law on extremism was adopted.

According to Tanzura, because the law lacks a clear definition of extremism, it has been used by prosecutors to investigate minority religions. Tanzura told us that FSB officers interrupted a weekly meeting of JW on May 24 in Asbest, a monocity about 70 km northeast of Yekaterinburg, demanding identification documents from all present (see reftel). JW members asked to leave but were not allowed to do so until all documents were checked and names were recorded by the FSB. JW recognizes the right of law enforcement officials to ask for personal identification; they insist, however, that it is illegal to record names or photograph the individuals whose documents are checked. The May 24 meeting was held in a hairdresser's shop leased by JW during off hours. Government officials have told us there may be a question of whether public meetings can be held in a space licensed for other purposes. Our visitors told us that JW lawyers typically file suits alleging illegal detention in circumstances such as these. They

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have difficulties getting courts to hear the cases, however. None of JW's cases has made it to the level of the Russian Supreme Court, but they have had some success with the European Court of Human Rights.

¶8. (U) JW press releases and reftel mention the placement of a 15-year-old boy in a children's rehabilitation facility as a result of the interruption of the Asbest meeting. As JW, NGO contacts, and government officials told us, the boy's parents were out of town at the time and could not be reached by authorities. They had not left a power of attorney or any other documents designating guardians in their absence. The boy was kept in the facility until his parents, who were informed of their son's placement in the facility, returned. The family is now reunited.

¶9. (U) JW press releases also implied that a woman miscarried as a result of police actions on May 24. We sought clarification from both JW and authorities. The woman came to the militia station on her own volition on May 26, with about 20 other JW members, to complain about militia actions on May 24. She provided a statement, provided her contact details, and left the station. The militia called her on May 27 and asked her to give further details about the incident and "explain her reasons for participating in the gathering." She returned home the same day and did not miscarry until May 31. The JW representatives with whom we spoke could not link her visit to the militia station with the miscarriage and made no allegations of mistreatment such as threats or physical force.

Lutherans Hoping for Restitution

¶10. (SBU) In a meeting at the consulate on July 13, pastor Roman Alfredovich Gaideman said that his 43-member congregation of Evangelical Lutherans (EL) has not faced harassment by authorities similar to the experiences of JW. According to Gaideman, Lutheranism has been practiced in this region since the arrival of Germans working in mining and metallurgy in the 1700s and is considered one of Russia's traditional religions, a "status" that he believes affords some protection. [Note: we

were unable to find any mention of "traditional religions" in the Law on Religious Freedom. Some commentators hold that religions that have been present on the territory of Russia for over 50 years qualify as traditional. End note.] In addition, Gaideman believes that due to its small size in Yekaterinburg, the EL church poses no threat to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

¶11. (SBU) Gaideman, who joined the Lutheran church here in 1994, noted that it is very difficult to register a religious organization today. Gaideman criticized the government's approach of maintaining that church and state are separate but at the same time putting pressure on businesses to pay for new ROC churches. He recounted difficulties he encountered when attempting to get restitution for Lutheran properties seized and destroyed in the 1940s. He said he would have settled simply for use of space in the building currently occupying the site of the former church, but has not been successful. According to Gaideman, the official reasoning is that since the pre-1940 building no longer exists, there is nothing to return and no basis for a claim. The Lutherans do not have any of the original documentation related to the church, such as a property deed.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The LDS experience in the Urals demonstrates that it is possible to practice a minority religion without harassment or interference by authorities. In contrast, our JW visitors convey the impression that they are trying to prove a point, appealing to the European Court of Human Rights to expose the restrictions imposed upon them by Russian regulations. If what they told us face-to-face was accurate, however, their press releases seem exaggerated. Though their defiant position draws unwanted attention from the authorities, JW leaders do not intend to adapt their methods of practicing their faith.

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